

## Snape's Subversive Masculinity

Criticism of the Harry Potter series often focuses on the portrayal of gender roles in the series, citing traditional and negative stereotypes or expectations. One instance is Christine Schoefer noting in her review of the first three books that girls do as the boys want, having no power of their own, and even the steadfast McGonagall is shaken up a time or two when male characters are not. While there may be a point there, at least within the first few books, one way to dispute the claim of stereotypical gender roles is to examine the rendering of Severus Snape. While his unemotional facade may make it easier to put Snape into a traditionally masculine gender role, his relationship with Lily Potter subverts an expected relationship between a man and woman, allowing her power over him. Conversely, his love for Lily turns him into Dumbledore's man and enables him to try to compensate for his past mistakes. Although within Harry Potter's universe Snape is certainly labeled as masculine, there are no simple answers as to where he fits in a discussion of gender roles, demonstrating the ways Rowling actually challenges traditional ideas about gender.

Although his relationship with Lily is subversive and his power lies in his love, Snape's most distinguished trait of hegemonic masculinity is his mastery of his own emotions and his expectations that others should be able to do the same. For the first several books, Snape is nothing more than a professor, a cold and sarcastic man who seems to have little warmth or emotion. He protects Harry and other students frequently, yet there besides his protection he is only known for his nasty, unfeeling attitude. He is a master of shielding his mind and keeping his emotions in check, evidenced by his skill in Occlumency that has kept him alive and able to lie to Voldemort. When he is teaching Harry Occlumency, he belittles Harry for his emotional nature, showing his disgust as he mocks "Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions. . . Weak people, in other words" (*Order* 536). For Snape, it is not enough to keep himself in check. Other people must be in check and control themselves. If emotion and thoughts are not kept hidden away, it means destruction, as Snape says of the "weak people" that they will "stand no chance against [Voldemort's] powers" (536). By containing his emotions, Snape is allowed to have power over situations and himself. His coldness and reservation show Snape is a man in control of himself and one who expects others to be in control of themselves as well.

The control Snape has over himself is usually impeccable, although he does and will lose control in the right situations, putting his emotions over everything else. Encounters

with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin bring out his animosity more than anything, more so than Harry's disregard for his own safety. Snape seems to be in control, cold and sarcastic as always, but his temper flares easily. In the Shrieking Shack, he is more concerned with vengeance against Black and Lupin than he is with justice. He admits to wanting revenge as he has Black and Lupin cornered, saying, "'Vengeance is very sweet,' he breathed at Black. 'How I hoped I would be the one to catch you'" (*Azkaban* 360). When Harry looks at Snape, he notices, "there was a mad glint in Snape's eyes that Harry had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason" (360). Despite what he later says to Harry about controlling emotions, Snape is not in control and he wants revenge as his hatred clouds his judgment, but his desire for revenge and subsequent temper are in line with traditional masculinity. According to traditional ideas about masculinity, Snape should want revenge for wrongs imposed on him; this is justice for him and he should have it by virtue of having been humiliated and wronged by Black and Lupin. His desire and temper are not only accepted, but also encouraged. There is no threat to his masculinity when he is the one with power and Snape fights for dominance over Black and Lupin to keep his masculinity and control.

Despite his later reservation and his need to demonstrate dominance over Black and Lupin, Snape's non-masculine need for Lily Potter's approval begins at a young age and continues, as Snape learns to control himself for her approval and to avoid rejection. Even when they first meet, this is the case and it sets the tone for the rest of their relationship. He is the first one who tells her she is a witch, although the first meeting doesn't go well as Harry notices in Snape's memories: "Harry. . . recognized Snape's bitter disappointment, and that Snape had been planning this moment for a while and that it had all gone wrong" (*Hallows* 665). He wants to impress Lily and simply ends up insulting and upsetting her, ruining his moment. She rejects him and despite this, he goes back to her. His desire for her approval is non-masculine; she should be grateful to him for telling her that she is a witch. She should allow him the power in their relationship, except that she doesn't. He desires her companionship so strongly that she holds power over him, power over what he says and does. Snape will take back his words and change them if they upset Lily, such as when they are on the train to Hogwarts. Lily does not catch his mistake as he says, "'She's only a-' he caught himself quickly; Lily, too busy trying to wipe her eyes without being noticed, did not hear him" (671). Even at their young age, Snape knows what he cannot say around her, in case she would reject him again, and her power lies in his fear of her rejection.

Even when Snape tries to take control, he is rejected and he concedes the argument, once again controlling himself instead of trying to control the power in their relationship. They are speaking of the Marauders and Snape says, "you're not going to- I won't let you" and Lily's immediate response is, "*Let me? Let me?*" (674). Lily will not let him take a hegemonic masculine role and he immediately backtracks as he realizes his mistake, which temporarily mends their strained friendship. They have been friends for a few years and Snape is well aware of what his true role is as Lily's friend; he must acquiesce to her. If he

does not acquiesce to her, he loses the companionship he has grown to depend on and he loses what little contact he has with her. Snape must please her and so he tries to the best of his abilities, disallowing himself to say his true opinions and ideas around her. Although he normally attempts to control himself so that he pleases Lily, Snape attempts to assert control once and is reminded of who really has the power.

However, Snape does not always follow the strict, unspoken guidelines he has in his relationship with Lily, where he conforms to her idea of what he should be and what he should say, and his lack of control finally results in rejection. His ultimate mistake comes when he feels humiliated by James Potter and the other Marauders as he attempts to reassert his traditional masculinity. Dangling upside down, helpless and humiliated already, Snape is initially rescued by Lily's intervention, but James Potter says, "you're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus" and Snape cannot accept her help (*Phoenix* 648). He insults her for it, breaking one of the unspoken rules as he says, "I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!" (648). Snape is cornered by his tormentors and, adding insult to injury, he is rescued by a female. Snape the teenager must assert his manhood, particularly in front of his attackers and in doing so, he irreparably damages his relationship with Lily. Once he breaks the unspoken rule, she rejects him and punishes him. Even his apologies are not enough, as Lily says, "I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine" (*Hallows* 676). She is the unforgiving, assertive one as Snape pleads for her forgiveness, which she never grants. Her rejection is her final, intentional display of power, as she ends the friendship Snape has tried to preserve by acquiescing to her for so long.

Although she rejects and ostracizes him, Lily still holds power over Snape's choices and actions as he tries to keep her, and then Harry, safe, even after her death. He joins Voldemort, but ultimately ends up betraying him for Dumbledore, based on who can keep Lily safe. When Snape is asking Dumbledore to keep her protected, he accepts Dumbledore's point that they need to keep all the Potters safe and Snape says, "Hide them all, then," he croaked, "keep her-- keep them safe. Please" (678). In order to keep Lily safe, Snape will also keep James Potter safe. For Snape, this concession is at odds with his extremely antagonistic relationship with James, yet he makes it for Lily. When Dumbledore asks what Snape will give him in return, Snape replies, "Anything" (678). Snape does not want to live in a world without Lily and he even says, "I wish... I wish *I* were dead" (678). When Dumbledore says he needs to protect Harry, Snape makes the choice to do it so that Lily will not have died in vain. Snape's reason for his choices is still Lily, as demonstrated when Dumbledore asks Snape if he has grown to care for Harry. Snape's response is to show his Patronus and when Dumbledore asks, "after all this time?" Snape replies, "always" (687).

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Snape's manhood in the series is rooted in his love for Lily and nothing makes his love or masculinity more apparent than his seemingly feminine Patronus, the doe. The doe represents her and is appropriate. Snape likely uses happy memories made when he was with

Lily to conjure it, after all. Although Snape's feminine Patronus appears to be at odds with the fact he is a man, Patronuses are not about gender, but love. There is undoubtedly hypocrisy as he tells Tonks her lupine Patronus "looks weak" when his is not only a representation of Lily, it is a representation of love, just as Tonks's Patronus turns out to be a wolf for Lupin (*Prince* 160). Snape may be apprehensive that another person could understand the meaning of his Patronus, involuntarily showing love as he defies his own beliefs about the worthlessness of emotion, consequently deflecting attention from his own Patronus by criticizing a similar one. Snape's Patronus is not just an indicator of his love, however. Snape's love is what gives him power; it gives him the power to change himself and to feel regret, becoming a better man in the process. Ironically, Snape's doe Patronus demonstrates his masculinity, as it shows he is not afraid to love.

While Snape has remarkable self-control and permissible outbursts of temper, his grief over Lily's death is non-masculine by traditionally masculine standards, even as it is the start of his true masculinity in Harry Potter. Snape should be able to accept and move past Lily's death, further locking away his emotions so that he stays in control of the situation and himself, but he is unable to until after Dumbledore uses his grief against him, asking him to help protect Harry. His 'non-masculine' grief is an expression of his love and remorse, allowing him to start becoming the man that dedicates himself to Harry Potter's safety and Voldemort's destruction.

Snape's grief and weakness are used, taking power away from him, but it is not until given the option of protecting Lily's son that Snape masters himself as Harry notices, "There was a long pause, and slowly Snape regained control of himself, mastered his own breathing" (*Hallows* 679). Snape can control himself when offered something on which he can act because he will protect her son, although he tells Dumbledore his decision is between them as Harry is "Potter's son" and Dumbledore reluctantly agrees to "never reveal. . . the best" of Snape (679). Snape makes his decision because of Lily and only gains control of himself once he does something that he believes will earn her approval. His self-control is a trait of hegemonic masculinity, but once again, his self-control comes down to Lily's approval and power over him, yet this is also the point at which he begins to change himself.

Lily's power over Snape subverts the traditional masculinity expected of him as a man, but her power does not mean Snape is without power of his own. His masculinity is not tied into who has the power in his relationship with Lily; rather, it comes down to a power that Dumbledore says, "is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death" (*Phoenix* 843). Snape's love for Lily is what incites him to become a better man. She may have even done a good thing by abandoning him when he calls her 'Mudblood' as Snape finally has a reason to feel regret and seek redemption. When Phineas Nigellus refers to Hermione as 'Mudblood', Snape says, "Do not use that word!" (*Hallows* 689). He learned his lesson and more, as he not only agrees to protect Harry, but he also protects others. When Snape learns that Harry must die, he is outraged and Dumbledore asks, "How many men

and women have you watched die?” and Snape responds simply, but effectively by saying, “Lately, only those whom I could not save” (687). It is not until Lily abandons him that he begins to find his true strengths; the power of his love for her pushes him to feel regret, to save lives, and to protect Harry.

The traditional masculinity expected of Snape displays itself in his mastery of self-control and emotion, even in his moments of anger where he is only trying to keep power and masculinity. For Snape, his relationship with Lily Potter and his love for her is part of his masculinity. The difference between Snape’s manhood and traditional masculinity is that his power is not about dominance. Snape wants to please her because he loves her. He does not want the exile that she forces on him, although this exile is better for him as he learns remorse. Rather, Snape’s power is his love. There is not dominance for him in his relationship with Lily and there does not need to be. Claims of gender stereotyping may have some relevant criticism at various points in the series, but using Snape and his relationship with a woman, Rowling presents an atypical masculinity by allowing the woman power and using this power to control a male character’s actions and behavior. In our universe, Snape and men like him might be labeled as ‘weak’ or ‘non-masculine,’ but in his universe Snape is acknowledged as a man, even called “the bravest man” Harry Potter ever knew (Hallows 758).

## Works Cited

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